9-2006

Education Policy Should Not Be Based on Programs that Cannot Be Replicated

John Yinger
The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, joyinger@syr.edu

It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
September 2006

Education Policy Should Not Be Based on Programs that Cannot Be Replicated

A story on ABC's news show, 20/20, on September 1, 2000 touted the high test scores in an alternative charter school in Oakland, California that serves many low-income students. According to the story, this school spends much less than surrounding schools and still produces much better results.

The reporter, John Stossel, concluded that we are being "stupid in America." To improve the nation's educational performance, he says, we should introduce more competition so that schools everywhere could imitate this alternative charter school and other schools that produce high test scores despite low funding and a high concentration of disadvantaged students.

This conclusion may make a good story, but it does not follow from the evidence. The alternative charter school in this report should, of course, be congratulated for its success. But this success cannot help other schools unless the reasons for this success can be both identified and replicated in other schools.

One possibility is that the school in Oakland is successful because of random factors totally outside its control, such as an unusually smart cohort of students. These factors may arise in other schools, but they cannot be replicated as a matter of public policy.

Another possibility is that for some random reason this schools has been able to attract uniquely talented leaders, uniquely talented teachers, teachers with an unusually high tolerance for putting in extra hours, or unusually committed parents compared to other schools that pay the same wages and have the same parental-engagement programs. Although these random factors may be beyond the reach of policy, additional funding might make it possible for other schools to reach similar levels of talent of parental involvement.

A third possibility is that the school is using policies and practices that are available to other schools with no increase in their spending but that they have decided not to adopt. This seems to be the possibility that John Stossel has in mind, but he provides no evidence to rule out other possibilities.

Some educators have built on the appealing idea that we can lean something from successful schools by identifying the policies and practices of schools that have high student test scores despite high concentrations of disadvantaged students and combining these policies and practices into a model for school reform called More Effective Schools (MES). Unfortunately, however, the evidence on MES reforms is mixed. In a study of comprehensive school reform programs, including MES, in New York City, for example, Bob Bifulco (at the University of Connecticut), Bill Duncombe, and I find that MES results in small improvements in student performance, but only as long as the MES trainers, who are not school employees, remain at the schools. Once the school is left to implement the MES model on its own, the student gains disappear.

In the 20/20 report, John Stossel claimed that the existence of low-spending schools with high test scores and high poverty concentrations constitutes proof that money does not matter. This claim is simply not correct. No one has been able to identify a set of low-cost, replicable programs and policies that will raise test scores in high-poverty schools. Many studies have shown that certain programs and policies, including pre-kindergarten programs and lower class sizes will boost student performance, but these programs cannot be implemented without additional funds. In addition, the MES results just cited indicate that following certain policies and practices of effective schools may boost student performance, but only if additional staff is hired.

The use of additional funds does not, of course, guarantee success. Many schools undoubtedly use policies and practices that cost more than equally effective alternatives. But one cannot identify these alternatives simply by looking at a few successful schools. Instead, we need to continue evaluating a wide range of programs to determine which ones can raise student performance under what circumstances and at what cost.

Formal program evaluation is a technical business that raises many issues that are difficult to bring into the public debate or to include in a news program. It is much easier to highlight the success of a few

schools that succeed despite the odds—easier, but much less enlightening. Progress in education reform requires the identification of policies and practices that both boost student performance and can be replicated in many schools.